

From the Chairman of the Association
Cllr James Jamieson

Partners to this letter:

The Centre for Governance and Scrutiny
The National Association of Local Councils
The Society for Innovation, Technology and Modernisation

Rt Hon Robert Jenrick MP
Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government
4th floor, Fry Building
2 Marsham Street
London
SW1P 4DF

4 March 2021

Dear Robert

Extending the ability for councils to hold meetings remotely

We are writing further to our letter of 12 October 2020 to reiterate the clear case for extending the ability for councils to hold meetings flexibly beyond May 2021 while we continue to manage the COVID-19 pandemic and to make this a permanent power open to councils to utilise.

This letter is also written in support of the 'letter before claim' jointly penned by Hertfordshire County Council, Lawyers in Local Government and the Association of Democratic Services Officers advising you of their intention of issuing a claim for declarations that local authorities already have the power to hold member meetings remotely, either wholly or partly. The declaration would be a way of addressing this issue without the need for legislative change. Without this primary or secondary legislation will be needed and this is time critical as the temporary powers lapse on 7 May.

Councils have used the vital powers granted by the Remote Meetings Regulations made under the Coronavirus Act 2020 to continue to do business while Covid lockdown restrictions have been in place. As restrictions on meeting indoors are likely to continue in some form beyond May 7 it is imperative that the powers are extended, particularly as full council meetings will need to be held following the May local elections.

However, in using the flexibility to hold meetings remotely to continue to operate at a time of national crisis, many councils report considerable advantages in retaining the option for councillors to hold or join meetings remotely in the long term to:

- Allow access to the role of councillor for a wider range of people, for example those with childcare or caring responsibilities and those with mobility issues and disabilities;
- Promote attendance and access to meetings in predominantly rural areas where public transport may be poor or difficult, where time taken travelling to a meeting is a big overhead on councillors and members of the public;
- Reduce the environmental impact of travel to meetings;
- Allow for more effective decision making for urgent matters;
- Retain the flexibility to continue to transact business in times of emergency in the future such as adverse weather, flooding transport disruption; and

- Retain the benefits that many councils have experienced of significantly more participation by the public in virtual meetings. The ability to record, archive and post meetings online is considered by many councils to increase transparency and openness of council decision making for the public.

While not all councils will wish to continue to hold remote meetings once COVID restrictions are removed, we support the continuance of flexibility for councils to hold remote meetings in the future. This should include the option of hybrid, in-person and remote meetings to encourage participation by a wider number of councillors and members of the public in council business and allow council business to continue in times of emergency.

We hope the government will support the application as it provides an option to allow for the continuation of remote meeting without the need for further legislation. However, if primary or secondary legislation is needed, we would ask that it should be brought forward in time to extend the power to meet remotely beyond 7 May. If you think it would be helpful to meet to discuss the way forward please contact Cheryll Gardiner (cheryll.gardiner@local.gov.uk/07789 512173) to arrange a convenient time and date.

Yours sincerely,



Cllr James Jamieson
Chairman

cc: Chloe Smith MP, Minister of State for the Constitution and Devolution, Cabinet Office

